

Psittacosis

What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis is a disease caused by bacterium called *Chlamydophila psittaci* (formerly *Chlamydia psittaci*). It is a disease of birds that can also affect people.

Where are the psittacosis bacteria found?

The bacteria are found in droppings, secretions and dust from the feathers of parakeets, parrots, and love birds; less often in poultry, pigeons, canaries, and finches. Birds that appear to be healthy can be carriers and shed the bacteria intermittently. Shedding can be increased by stressors, such as shipping, crowding and chilling.

Who gets psittacosis?

Persons most likely to get psittacosis are those who handle infected household birds, usually psittacine birds (parrots, parakeets). Others who may be at risk are workers in environments where infected birds may be housed, especially if workers have exposure to feathers, dust and droppings (e.g., pet shops, aviaries, wildlife centers, and poultry processing facilities). Laboratory workers who handle contaminated materials outside of safety cabinets may also be at risk.

How is psittacosis spread?

Transmission occurs when the bacteria are inhaled from dried bird droppings, secretions, or dust from feathers.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis?

The most common symptoms in humans are fever, headache, feeling of weakness, loss of appetite, muscle aches, chills, sore throat, cough and sensitivity to light. These symptoms can present as a mild flu-like illness or can be very severe, especially in older persons.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The symptoms generally appear about 10 days after exposure, but can appear as early as 5 days or as long as 4 weeks after exposure.

Do infected people need to be excluded from work or school?

No, but persons who are coughing should be instructed to cough into paper tissues which are then discarded in a sanitary fashion.

What is the treatment for psittacosis?

Antibiotics of the tetracycline group are administered for 10-14 days after temperature returns to normal.

How can psittacosis be prevented?

Controlling the disease in the bird population helps reduce the risk for people. However, birds that seem healthy can shed the bacteria and new birds may reintroduce the bacteria, so prevention depends on properly designed and managed facilities that raise and sell birds. Sick birds should be diagnosed and treated. If the birds are sold while they are being treated, the new owner should be informed to be sure the treatment is completed. Bird cages should be cleaned regularly with disinfectants (Lysol, or bleach solution) and the contents of the cage should be disposed of properly. Detailed information on prevention/control of avian chlamydiosis is available at <http://www.nasphv.org/documentsCompendiaPsittacosis.html>.

Where can I find additional information on psittacosis?

The National Association of Public Health Veterinarians publishes a Compendium of Measures to Control Chlamydomphila psittaci Infection Among Humans (Psittacosis) and Pet Birds (Avian Chlamydiosis). The Compendium is available on-line, at <http://www.nasphv.org/documentsCompendiaPsittacosis.html>, and is updated regularly. The Compendium contains information for veterinarians and physicians on the diagnosis and treatment of psittacosis and avian chlamydiosis. The Compendium and several fact sheets available at the same website contain information for owners, breeders, pet shop managers and others on the prevention of avian chlamydiosis.